

How girls are lured into prostitution

Sex-trafficking cases lag behind sheer number of victims



By [Kristina Davis](#) | 4:47 p.m. Oct. 31, 2015 | Updated, 5:08 p.m.



She was 14 when she was approached by Tony Brown at a San Diego County mall. Brown, who was 19, lavished attention on the girl, called her his girlfriend, and she quickly believed she was in love.

Two years later, she was in jail in Las Vegas, a 16-year-old runaway dressed provocatively in a low-cut maroon mini dress and heels, arrested after raising suspicions that she was loitering on the Strip for prostitution. How did she get there?

The same way thousands of teenage girls and young women have over the years, authorities say: through coercion, force and fraud, often at the hands of San Diego County gang members looking to build their status and get rich off selling others again and again for sex.

Her story may sound rare, the kind of thing that would happen in someone else's family. But a new sex-trafficking study released Monday challenged many of those notions with staggering implications.

In what was described as the first and most comprehensive study of its kind in the U.S., researchers from the University of San Diego and Point Loma Nazarene University estimated there are 8,830 to 11,773 underage and adult sex-trafficking victims in the county per year. They come from all socio-economic and racial backgrounds, and 98 percent are female.

And the vast majority of the business — an underground economy

gangs.

“It was more massive in terms of numbers than we even anticipated,” said District Attorney Bonnie Dumanis. “Anecdotally most of the information we knew, but the depth and quantity was startling.”

PREVIOUS: [Sex trafficking may trap up to 11,700 SD girls](#)

Yet a tally of local prosecutions are nowhere near the numbers suggested in the latest study, something prosecutors, law enforcement and child advocates hope to change as they get better at identifying this hidden population of victims.

“The No. 1 obstacle ... is the fact that victims don’t identify themselves as victims,” said Chief Deputy District Attorney Summer Stephan. “We knew this was severely underreported.”

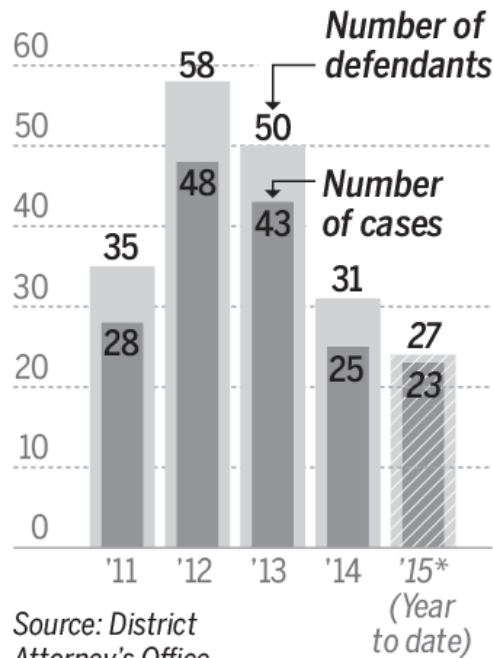
In 2012, the District Attorney’s Office prosecuted 48 human trafficking and pimping and pandering cases of adults and minors. (The data may include some adult cases that don’t involve coerced prostitution.) That number dropped by almost half last year, with 25 cases.

Deputy District Attorney John Rice, chief of the office’s human trafficking and sex crimes unit, said there was no obvious explanation for the fluctuation in cases.

The U.S. Attorney’s Office

Trafficking cases

Human trafficking and pimping and pandering cases prosecuted by the District Attorney’s Office



number of human

Research methodology

The study released Monday estimated 8,830 to 11,773 underage and adult sex-trafficking victims in the county. Researchers explain how they got to that number:

“First, we looked at how many people had been arrested for nine crimes — kidnapping minor for prostitution, pimping a minor, human trafficking and others. We removed duplicates, and we did not count the same person twice. We excluded adult pimping and pandering arrests, because we didn’t know without looking at the case files whether force, fraud or coercion was used.

We found that 2,645 facilitators of sex trafficking had been arrested since 2007, which is 406 per year. (It was not determined how many arrests turned into prosecutions.)

Then, we also knew from our interviews with facilitators that each (pimp) controls 4.34 girls or women on average. This is also an underestimate, given that prostituted women reported that facilitators controlled eight women on average. But we went with the lower number: 406 facilitators x 4.34 women = 1,766 victims.

1,766 is only the fraction of the total victim population that comes into contact with law enforcement. We don’t know what that fraction is. But according to previous studies, the percentage of various illicit trade intercepted by authorities is usually within 15 to 20 percent. So if 406 pimps represents 20 percent of the total pimp population, then that total population is 2,030 pimps. And then, when you multiply again by the 4.34 average number of victims controlled, you get 8,810 victims.

Recalculate that number for 15 percent of the pimp population, then that total victim population is 11,746.”

A more detailed version of the study, which is undergoing peer review, is expected to be released in another month. It was funded by the National Institute of Justice

trafficking-related cases, including using the powerful racketeering statute against gangs in a handful of high-profile cases over the past

few years. An accurate statistical breakdown of the cases in San Diego was not available because the office includes child pornography cases in its overall exploitation data, due to some overlap between those and gang trafficking cases.

The report released last week reiterated the low number of such cases that appear in the criminal justice system, estimating that only 15 to 20 percent of human trafficking victims in the county come into contact with law enforcement.

How girls are recruited

That 16-year-old girl who was finally noticed by Las Vegas Metropolitan police likely looks back on that moment in her life as a blessing.

She was one of the lucky ones able to escape the life. She moved away, got married and had three children.

A federal racketeering prosecution was building against Brown and 23 others as alleged members of a North Park gang specializing in prostituting girls and young women, and her case was among those included — even though her trip to Vegas happened in 2000.

A look at her experience, detailed in police reports, reveals how similar gang members' recruiting techniques were then as they are now, and how a girl at the mall had her childhood stolen from her, as she later recalled to a detective.

Sometime after she met Brown at the mall at age 14, he was arrested and would write to her from custody, she told police. Her mother found some of those notes in her backpack, messages that tried to persuade her daughter to work as a prostitute for him.

"I want nothing but the best. I got the gold the cars and the girls you know. I telling you stop hatin and gettin mad when my other set of girl give me money because it benefits you to," read one letter.

Another: “\$ Stop saying what you ain’t gonna do. Those are the guys who pay hundreds of dollar for just your attention.”

And: “Baby don’t think when I ask you to sell your body I don’t care cause I do. You know what I think of that. It’s nothing wrong with it. A matter of fact I got more respect for that person because it takes pride joy comes along whin money being made to make me happy.”

The teen told police that Brown eventually got her out on El Cajon Boulevard in an area known for prostitution. She gave all her proceeds to Brown, she said, and also cashed her college savings bonds for him.

Before the Vegas trip, she told her mom she wanted to go to Magic Mountain with her high school friends for a few days. Her mother said no. The teen left anyway, ending up instead with Brown dropping her off on the Strip, which was buzzing due to an Evander Holyfield heavyweight championship fight.

She wasn’t out long before being arrested by police while she was talking to a group of guys. She gave police a fake name at first, but after some coaxing she broke down sobbing, saying she didn’t want to do this anymore, according to the police report.

She didn’t talk to Brown after that, she said.

Brown is also accused of taking underage girls to Los Angeles for prostitution in 2001, and trying to entice a girl into his car with marijuana and money in 2006 near El Cajon Boulevard, according to the indictment. He and several other defendants are headed to trial in the case, in which authorities identified 60 victims.

Researchers describe similar tactics to recruit teenage girls happening today, although now Facebook and other social platforms have replaced notes in backpacks.

Take the recent case involving a 15-year-old girl from Hemet. She posted an ad on a website last fall looking for babysitting or

housecleaning work and was contacted by a man who had prostitution in mind instead, said Rice.

She was observed by police soliciting on an Oceanside street. The pimp eventually pleaded guilty and was sentenced to more than nine years in prison for crimes against her and a second girl.

Schools have also turned into rich recruiting grounds, researchers found.

Girls are wooed by charming guys, or promised designer clothing, purses and iPhones, authorities said. They are plied with alcohol and drugs. Isolated from their friends and families. Some are already loners, kids who don't fit in or suffer from mental disabilities.

"They are made to believe in the beginning that they are cared for, and by then it's too late," Dumanis said.

Recent prosecutions and information gleaned from the study also uncovered the increased use of a different kind of recruiter: the experienced prostitute. Such girls are sometimes referred to as "bottoms" by their gang.

"It's a much softer sell, not stranger danger," said the DA chief, Rice. "Sometimes it's other girls sitting in class next to them."

Researchers who interviewed San Diego County educators for the study were told that these girl recruiters were considered to be the most dangerous because they could be most convincing, said Ami Carpenter, who co-authored the study with Jamie Gates.

During one federal investigation, authorities were told of a suspected pimp who tried to enroll an experienced prostitute into a high school, likely for recruitment purposes, U.S. Attorney Laura Duffy said during a news briefing last year.

There are several examples in recent court cases of female

In one, a woman who called herself “Cash Crystal” boasted on Facebook about her gang membership and the money she earned in prostitution, court records show. She is accused of recruiting an underage girl in Vista in 2013 and taking her from Los Angeles to Las Vegas the next day for sex work, according to the federal indictment.

In one post, she claimed the gang targets “Minors Cuz They Are Easy To Knock!”

How to deal with such female recruiters has become a bit of a flashpoint between prosecutors and recovery service providers. What’s the line between victim and victimizer?

Prosecutors say they evaluate those cases carefully to see whether criminal charges are appropriate — even as they recognize that these women were probably recruited at a young age and victimized, too — but often give them a chance at probation and recovery rather than prison, as the pimps would get.

Rice said victim advocates have called him out on prosecuting such women before. “Still, some mother’s child is being recruited for human trafficking,” he said. “I can’t just let that go.”

Susan Munsey, executive director of GenerateHope, a safehouse and recovery program for sex-trafficking victims, acknowledges the challenge but leans toward recognizing female recruiters as victims.

“These guys distance themselves as much from the crime as possible,” she said, and oftentimes the sex worker takes the fall. “They’re in a very difficult situation and they’re finding a way to survive it.”

She recalled the case of one trafficker who used a young woman’s phone to contact a minor, and then sent the woman to the bus stop to pick her up. The minor turned out to be an undercover officer, and the woman was arrested and charged. As part of her sentence, she was ordered to be registered as a sex offender.

“I have a problem with that,” Munsey said.

Co-dependence

The single greatest challenge to bringing a human-trafficking case to prosecution is not only finding the victim, but getting the victim to participate in the case.

“It’s critical,” Dumanis said.

Prosecutors and investigators run into similar difficulties with domestic violence victims — the dependency on their abuser, the isolation from family, the emotional and physical abuse and the threat to not only their own safety, but their family’s.

“What we’re seeing is each case is equally difficult to investigate and do than any homicide because of the complexity of the cases and the ability to keep victims safe,” said Stephan, the chief deputy DA.

“Because of gang involvement, there are a lot of witness relocations. The trauma is so resistant and long lasting, we end up having to make sure services are provided for years and years and years to our victims.”

Munsey at GenerateHope described their condition as similar to the Stockholm Syndrome.

“They’ve bonded with their captors, and they started in adolescence, when their brains aren’t fully developed yet,” she said. “It’s usually a year of going through therapy before they figure out that they’ve been duped. It’s only then they are able to say, ‘That jerk, this is what he did to me.’”

Of the women GenerateHope sees each year, she estimates only 10 to 20 percent are involved in the prosecution of their pimps. “That’s low,” Munsey acknowledged.

The county has successfully prosecuted pimps without a victim’s cooperation or testimony, usually with solid evidence taken during an undercover sting and with complete cellphone or Facebook

communications between victim and pimp, Rice said. Still, he said, juries typically want to hear from the victim herself.

Getting the victims out of their environments and into a safe space is also critical for getting a victim on the path to testifying and turning her life around.

A lack of bedspace in the county has proved challenging. Of the mere 25 beds in the county, GenerateHope has eight.

“We have nowhere near enough beds,” Munsey said. “I turn away 10 to 20 women each month. That is just the hardest part of my job. ... The funding is not there.”

And none of those 25 beds is for juvenile victims. If they don’t have family to go back to, they can be sent to Juvenile Hall or put in group homes or foster care — places that make them especially vulnerable to further recruitment.

Investigations have also become trickier as traffickers adapt.

“It’s a constantly changing playing field,” Rice said. “Once we get a successful method, there seems to be a shift.” For instance, he said some sex trafficking websites are using the hard-to-track Bitcoin as currency now instead of cash.

Another surprising factor that may play a role is race.

While the majority of gang-related sex trafficking cases being prosecuted in the county are of black gangs, the study found that Hispanic and white gangs are equally involved. This information was learned through nearly 160 interviews with gang-affiliated people in prison for various crimes, said one of the study’s authors, Carpenter.

“Black gangs are very outspoken and flashy about their pimping identity,” she said, noting how the lifestyle is glamorized in pop culture and rap music, and openly boasted about on social media.

She said Hispanic and white gangs admitted to the same behavior, only they conducted it more under the cloak of darkness, for different reasons.

“Hispanic guys reject that label pimp. They say we are their protectors, bodyguards. They are contracted by women to drive them around,” Carpenter said.

“The Mexican Mafia does not formally approve of prostitution, and a lot of guys we talked to have to keep it on the down-low because they don’t want to have a hit out on them, or if they start making too much money at it they start getting taxed,” she said. “They’re not Facebooking this stuff.”

White biker gangs also keep it quiet, sometimes to protect their club membership and also because they have become more savvy about how prosecutors are going after human trafficking under organized crime statutes, she said.

She said there was also evidence of human trafficking by Native American groups in casinos, a Somali gang and a Chaldean gang, according to information learned through interviews and local prosecutions.

Joining forces

In January, 15 local, state and federal law enforcement agencies formed The San Diego Violent Human Trafficking and Child Exploitation Task Force to attack the issue.

The effort has expanded statewide with the creation of the Human Exploitation and Trafficking — or HEAT — Institute. Founded this year by Alameda County District Attorney Nancy O’Malley, the group is bringing others into the fold, including education officials, foster care advocates, child welfare leaders, attorneys, physicians and other service providers.

The commission held its first summit in San Diego Thursday, one of

throughout California. The information is to be gathered in a report and analyzed for recommendations and an action plan.

“We can’t fight this battle ourselves,” Imperial County District Attorney Gilbert Otero implored the roomful of advocates Thursday. “This is about getting everyone together and on the same page when it comes to human trafficking.”